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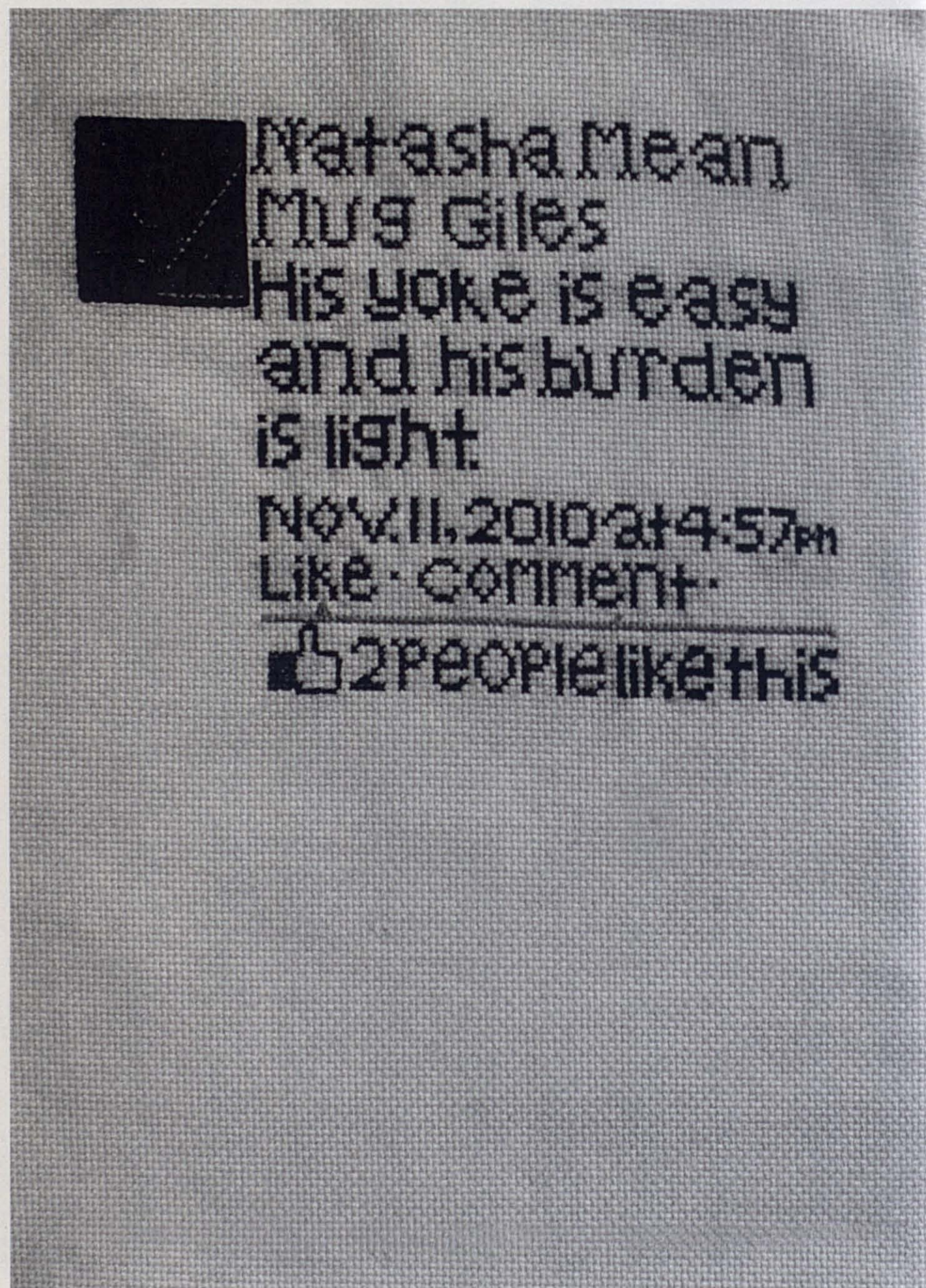
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Facebookisms, *Natasha*, 2011, hand cross stitched embroidery and aida cloth, 9"x14", Toutant

## Telling Stories: Discussions with Sidonie Smith, Keith Knapp, and Terry Castle

**Sidonie Smith** is Martha Guernsey Colby Collegiate Professor of English and Women's Studies at the University of Michigan. Her research interests include autobiography studies, feminist theories, and women's literature.

Interviewers: Eir-Anne Edgar and Tim Vatovec

DC: What do you think is the value of social theory? What role does it play in your work?

SS: I am really interested in questions of how it is that autobiographical narratives produce their authenticity effects. What aspects of a narrative convince a reader or an audience that this is an authentic, and "true" story? We can observe how scandals erupt when charges are made that a narrative presenting itself as "true" may not be true in part or at all. And this leads to another question: what are the factors internal to a narrative and external to a narrative that lead to charges of hoaxing? Julia Watson and I have been trying to tease out answers to these questions in two kinds of autobiographical narratives: instances of witness narratives and charges of false-witnessing and instances of ethnic autobiography and charges of the impersonation of an indigenous subject. In the latter case, we are thinking about how certain metrics of authenticity shore up the performative production of what it means to be indigenous. Social theory is central to getting at the anxieties that produce the scandal of the hoax as well as the ways in which narratives project, or not, convincing authenticity.

DC: We were talking a little bit – well we were talking a lot about the issue of authenticity. Do you think accuracy is, then, connected to authenticity? To be authentic does a narrative have to be 100% accurate? What is accuracy? I think that it was a really good point when you were discussing the Internet, right – I mean to do fact checking. I don't remember - this is about memory too, because memory is so loopy because what feels right or truthful to you as you experience it might be factually inaccurate?

SS: Well, that's the complicated thing: when you invoke the word 'accuracy' or 'truth,' what is the kind of truth you are invoking? Truth to what? Truth to facticity? Truth to a social reality? Truth to a shared history? A psychological truth? We tend to think of the opposite of truth as lies, but that is not always productive for exploring the ways people tell life stories and the social work those stories do and the ways in which particular life stories gain saliency at particular historical moments. Stanley Fish quipped, that even if an autobiographical narrative is full of lies, it nonetheless speaks a truth – in this case a truth to character. Or consider the multiple kinds of truth that the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearings acknowledged. The Commission's Final Report emphasizes the importance to the reconciliatory process of acknowledging and pursuing multiple kinds of "truth." Factual or forensic truth provides evidence for establishing the "what" of what happened in the past. Personal truth comes from witnessing to the subjective experience of suffering and victimization. The process of coming to a fuller understanding of, or knowledge about, the context of everyday life under apartheid produces social truth. Healing and restorative truth emerges through the production of a collective, consensual narrative of nation through which the new South Africa can remember its past, found its future, a narrative of nation that listens for the voices of the formerly voiceless and disenfranchised. In its process, then, the TRC negotiated the complicated relays among positivist truth, subjective truth, social truth, and narrative truth. Or approach the question of truth through theories of and research on memory. Neuroscientists talk about the neuro-plasticity of the brain, and about



the way memories are re-constellated at the moment of remembering. Such a generative reconstellation complicates any simplistic notion of a truth to memory.

**Keith N. Knapp** is Chair of the History Department at The Citadel, The Military College of South Carolina, and Westvaco Professor of National Security Studies. His research on filial piety, ritual, and Confucianism in early China has been published in English, Chinese, and Japanese. His current research explores the genre of collective biography in early Chinese historiography.

Interviewers: Tom Loder and Richard Parmer

DC: What specifically made you get into autobiography?

KK: Most Chinese histories are organized in the same way. They have the annals, which are year-by-year studies of what the emperor does and then there are biographies. The annals are the really rock solid history, because there are court reporters who are supposed to be taking down the emperors' words and actions. The biographies are supplementary materials that are supposed to explain what happens in the annals. Those biographies are set up to help flesh out the bare bones that the annals provide, but the annals are much more reliable because they have all of this apparatus behind them. But the annals are fairly dry reading and terse, the biographies on the other hand are much more fleshed out and narrative. To do any research on early medieval China, you have to read biographies and quite a lot of them. It was when my material was all biographies, I found that they had all of this really weird, wacky, wonderful material that made them very compelling. I personally know very little about autobiographies written in this period, because there are so few. That was Professor Wells' subject for his book. Whatever was there he found it. His material really struck me as interesting. One of the things that he shows is that these accounts are mainly tropes strung together, but they don't really reveal anything about the person themselves; so early Chinese autobiography isn't all that revealing.

DC: Are there particular theorists you find you gravitate towards?

KK: Social theory has always been really important for me. At Berkeley we had this great historiography class that all history graduate students had to take. I had this Indian specialist who had us read many different works on early modern Europe. He introduced us to the Annales School and Fernand Braudel and others, so that really was a great moment where you had all these competing approaches that all focused on Europe, but the professor said, "Ok. This is what they've done, but you can apply this to your own field." That was extraordinarily helpful. One of the social theorists that heavily influenced me was Emile Durkheim and his *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*. When I started teaching and tried to explain Chinese ancestor worship, I started telling students that what's sacred in China is the family. This is god, this is what all aims are for and all your actions are taken to benefit this. I then realized that this is all Durkheim: Durkheimian social analysis of this religious form. It was a very powerful way of looking at this. It gave me incredible insights into how people approached life. Durkheim and Weber, in their exchanges, and in their different approaches, have been very important. Weber for bureaucratic functions and charismatic leadership.

DC: One more question I wanted to ask. Is there anything about your work that people would ask you, but never get around to?

KK: The thing is that, how I would characterize my own work is that I'm really interested in the ordinary. In some ways I'm a very weird person, but in other ways I'm very ordinary. What often happens when we look at in past cultures is that the ordinary doesn't stand out or isn't even visible, because the people who get noticed are extraordinary and the words that get treasured are extraordinary. Fine literature, that's what people will want to read, they don't want to read the schlock that's common like Romance novels. Two hundred years from now, how many people are going to read romance novels that were produced at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century? Unless he/she is a scholar, nobody's going to want to read them. The elegant commercial slogan of "Cotton is the fabric of our lives" will be lost as well. That's what I'd like to recover. How did ordinary people think and see their world. These common assumptions about how things work actually draw on history. This is where someone like Fernand Braudel who develops the Annales School methodology of the *longue durée*. Economic, geographic change is very long and imperceptible to history. These things that don't seem so important, how people live with their family, actually have a tremendous effect on history. Yet, because they are not seen as important at the time, they aren't noted. It's this pursuit of the ordinary, which is a weird thing to pursue, is really what I'm after. The more I can reconstruct the lives of these people who lived in the 2<sup>nd</sup> through the 7<sup>th</sup> century, the happier I am. It's like a huge puzzle with a bunch of pieces missing, but just recovering those few pieces gives us a general idea, even though it might be one with a bunch of holes. Each time I can add a piece to that puzzle, I'm really happy. "The Exemplary Everymen" was an article I wanted to write for a long time, because I felt that I got back some of the texture of the lives of these people living in 5<sup>th</sup> century southern China. Through the accounts of these two commoners, we can see the daily routines of life and how they interacted with each other. When I'm able to do that, I feel the most successful and personally the happiest.

**Terry Castle** is Walter A. Haas Professor in the Humanities at Stanford University. She had published nine books, including *The Professor and Other Writings*. In her spare time, she enjoys creating art.

Interviewers: Richard Parmer and Heather McIntyre

DC: And I was wondering with all of the issues surrounding theory today within academia is there any hope for it or is there a way to salvage it as an intellectual pursuit?

TC: Well, that is a great question, Heather, but one so complex I can hardly begin to marshal my feeble brain cells to answer! I was a Ph.D. student in the late 1970s, just as 'theory' began to infiltrate American higher education and academic culture--with the translation from French of people like Roland Barthes and Derrida and indeed other critics who renewed interest, for example, in the Russian formalists of the teens and twenties. But even then I was a bit ambivalent about what people were calling theory--especially the version known 'Continental' theory. Most American scholars in English departments read Derrida and others only in translation, and one's understanding tended to be highly mediated, peer-group-driven, and simplistic for this reason. More and more English professors were really only--I guess the polite word would be 'appropriating'--concepts which by this point were ninth or tenth or eleventh hand. Now I was definitely influenced by some of the French theorists--especially Roland Barthes, an extraordinary and amazing writer. Then--and now--I make a permanent exception for him. And when I wrote my second book--on 18<sup>th</sup> century



fiction, the masquerade and the carnivalesque—I was very, very influenced by Bakhtin. Yet at the same time, I never wanted to throw myself overboard into 'theory.' Something always held me back. Yes, my first book, on Samuel Richardson, was mildly poststructuralist, and the second book (as noted) Bakhtinian. But I tried to avoid sounding like I was writing some sort of weird 'French-in-translation' or 'Russian-in-translation' with large dollops of fashionable jargon. I wanted to find my own way of saying something and most important, I wanted to make my writing accessible to people who were not necessarily immersed in theory. A lot of the quasi-scientific terminology sounded absurd and anachronistic, too, when applied to some of the historical figures I was most interested in at the time. I never wanted to write something, say, like "Alexander Pope and 'Heteroglossia'." I would have felt dishonest and silly doing so.

And increasingly, when I began teaching at Stanford, I found that more and more of the English Ph.D. students most drawn to 'theory' had not read very much literature in the old-school sense. You'd say something about Dickens's *Bleak House* or *Ulysses* and they would never have read it. You know, at least the New Critics read stuff! In turn, then one had the canon wars and culture wars and all of the attacks on the traditional English-American literary canon—these events reinforced the large-scale falling off of interest in the English and American literary classics. Of course I'm not dissing the 1980s and 1990s critique of the canon—it was hugely necessary and important. In my own historical field—eighteenth-century fiction—the rediscovery of lost works, in particular, works by women authors, was a tremendous gain. I totally supported these efforts at bibliographic recovery and the opening up of the canon into new areas. But in some cases, the baby went out with the bathwater. Beginning in the 1980s, or so I found in my teaching, more and more advanced students had read works by the fashionable theorist of the moment—whether Guattari or Benjamin or Judith Butler or Katherine Hayles or Eve Sedgwick—but had no real knowledge of literary history.

If you pointed this absence of knowledge out—if you saw it as a bad thing, a sad thing, an impoverishing thing—you were liable to run into a lot of 'political' and ideological resistance from both students and other professors. It was not impossible to encounter students assailing Dickens as a sexist pig, say, or arguing that he was to be despised as a 'British' author because the British happened to be very good at colonizing other countries and peoples in the eighteenth and nineteenth century; then you'd find the student in fact had never read Dickens. I may be an arch-reactionary, but I think that the so-called 'turn' to theory—now thirty years on—was in some ways very damaging. It had a terrible effect on the *writing* of literary criticism—of writing about books. Academic writing about literature has entirely lost any general readership—has lost its credibility with even literate, highly educated, non-academic people. The urge to read good literature and talk about it has by no means vanished from mainstream American culture: witness the huge interest in book clubs and book groups in, literature blogs on the Internet and so on. But people want to read books and talk about them in human and complex ways—not be bludgeoned, in half-baked jargon, with all the reasons they are ideologically unsound. Literature—and literary criticism—cannot be reduced to moralizing. Literary works are often contradictory, transgressive, absolutely unassailable to any idea of political 'right thinking' or critical grandstanding about 'doing the right thing.' So much of great literature is about doing the wrong thing—look at *King Lear* or *Crime and Punishment* or J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*—and it describes this wrong thing so fantastically well, with so much force and beauty, that one marvels at the power of another human being (the Author, a figure supposedly dead, but definitely alive and kicking) to mess so profoundly with one's mind. Great works of art are always deeply rebellious. And so many people in the high-flying academic theory crowd, especially some of the Marxist and 'oppositional' critics, are very well-off, materialistic, and conventional people. Absolutely complacent and vain about their position in the system. Happy consumers. I think it's absurd to say you're a revolutionary or your thoughts are deeply subversive when you're pulling down a big salary as a senior professor, as part of a university elite, when you've got a

nice house and lifetime job security. I don't think literature is about being a happy consumer. Or at least the kind of literature that *lives* is not about existing comfortably within the academic system.

Let me assure you—I am not opposed to 'difficulty' or complex argument or intellectual seriousness of any kind. I don't make my criticisms out of some anti-intellectual bias: e.g., "Oh, you're using all these big words that we don't understand, so we're going to just let it all hang out." What I don't like is the bad writing, and the second-order nature of so much that passes itself off as literary theory these days. And more broadly, a lack of intellectual curiosity. And then of course, there's theory and there's theory. I ask my students and they say, "Well, we're very interested in making theoretical 'interventions' about such-and-such." ('Intervention' is exactly the sort of theory-word that I loathe.) I will say to them, "Have you read Rousseau? Have you read Schopenhauer? Have you read Nietzsche? Have you read Freud?" Have you read Durkheim? Often, no, hardly anything, and now they're Ph.D. students in a literature program. Along with an absence of general historical knowledge—very few of my students, even some of the advanced, could tell you very much, say, about the French Revolution or the First World War—too many lack any broad familiarity with the history of ideas, generally. There are so many amazing intellectual figures out there who are just somehow not 'hip' to them, or even on the screen: Max Weber, Norbert Elias, Simone Weil, Erwin Panofsky, Simone de Beauvoir—even someone like Ruskin, on the visual arts. Mind-blowing. I ask my students, "Did you ever come across these people?" And they say, "No," and I think, "So, what will it be, then? Althusser—and only Althusser—forever?"

But you know I could just be getting old and cynical. It could be that something completely unexpected is going to happen that will change everything. There will be some genius who comes along, maybe even in an English Ph.D. program! A lowly graduate student who turns out to be a genius, and I do believe in geniuses. That would be funny. Academics, for the most part, are *not* geniuses which is why they are always saying—or have been saying of late—that genius doesn't exist. Everything is 'culturally' constructed. That there is no authority before whom we should genuflect. But I believe that true 'seers' exist: people with extraordinary artistic and linguistic capacities, extraordinary imaginations, people who see absolutely what no one else is seeing. There are visionaries and beautiful monsters. And sometimes, you know, with great artists—Shakespeare, Mozart, Samuel Johnson, Keats, Wagner, Virginia Woolf, Manet, Picasso, Walker Evans, De Kooning, oh, I could go on forever—all you can do is just bow down and say thank you.